Dictynna
Revue de poétique latine

5 | 2008
Varia

The theatrical life of things: Plautus and the physical

Alison Sharrock

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/dictynna/419
ISSN: 1765-3142

Publisher
Université Lille-3

Electronic reference
Alison Sharrock, « The theatrical life of things: Plautus and the physical », *Dictynna* [Online], 5 | 2008, Online since 25 November 2010, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/dictynna/419

The theatrical life of things: Plautus and the physical

Alison Sharrock

1 It is a topos of criticism on Roman comedy to bemoan the inadequacy of merely reading a text, by comparison with engagement in the total experience of the play in performance.[1] This article attempts to analyse and celebrate the materiality and thingyness of Plautine humour as an especially intense case of the paradox of reading dramatic literature, in which the life of the thing on stage comes to birth in the process of reading. It is concerned with the 'semiotization of the object', in a manner influenced by the Prague school of literary and theatrical semiotics, which 'suppresses the practical function of phenomena in favour of a symbolic or signifying role'.[2] While this semiotization does not apply only to physical objects such as bodies and props, but to any signifier (character, action, etc), what is special about material objects is their third-level capacity to act as signifiers of the artful artificiality of comic drama, even (paradoxically) when their material form exists only in the mind of a reader. Things on stage become theatrical, in farce doubly so: Plautus engages with the artificiality of theatre in a celebration of the physical, which brings humour off the page.

2 Although the archaeology of theatre buildings and the reconstruction of original practices in costume, scenery, and staging have much to offer to our understanding of ancient drama, these matters make only a secondary contribution to my concerns here, in so far as they contribute to the role of these things as semiotic props.[3] Perhaps the most active and eloquent of pieces of stage equipment in ancient theatre is the door. The door (usually double or triple in comedy[4]) of the stage-house is crucial to the play of theatrical mimesis: the door embodies desire for entry and exit which drives the plot (story) and makes the play happen (performance), in tragedy as well as comedy, as is well known from such famous scenes as the plot-moving transitions through the stage door in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. The metatheatrical funsters of comedy often challenge us with the theatrical fiction of the house, as does the Lar in Plautus' *Aulularia* when he describes himself as the 'household god of that house over there that you see' – meaning the false

house, the house of theatre; or as does the manipulative Tranio of *Mostellaria*, the estate agents' play, who choreographs a phantom sale and a party of ghosts behind the scenes.[5] It is the door, symbol of desire, symbol of artifice, about which is concentrated the intense physicality of the opening scene of *Curculio*.

3 *Curculio* offers an extreme example of Plautine physicality. This play is over-determined with props: a candle, a door, fragrant wine, water, a ring, which comes in twice (and has a twin), a letter to go with it, a seal with represented elephant-slaying sword, a missing eye, a bad gut, animal names, like the wolfy banker Lyco, and the weevil-parasite Curculio, and a property manager who comes out for a little chat with the audience about the real-life Rome they can see around them. All this adds up to an intensified theatricality, in which the artificiality of the physical process is celebrated. This typically Plautine comic mess of a plot is becoming better known, but nonetheless a brief summary might be beneficial.[6] A young man (Phaedromus) is in love with a girl (Planesium) who is under the control of a pimp (Cappadox). Phaedromus needs money in order to buy his beloved and has therefore sent his parasite, the eponymous Curculio, to Caria to borrow money from a friend. While Curculio was there, he fell in with a soldier (Therapontigonus) whom he worked out to be Phaedromus' rival, stole his ring, and returned in triumph. The ring seals a forged letter which frees Planesium, through the unwitting agency of the banker (Lyco) who had been commissioned by Therapontigonus to take care of his affairs. The unexpected arrival of the soldier, however, threatens to undo the solution, until Planesium recognizes the match between his ring and her own: she is his long lost sister and can therefore properly marry Phaedromus. In this play, Curculio has only one eye, and Cappadox has a bad gut.

4 The extreme physicality of this play connects it with one of the great regulars of comedy in many times and places: emphasis on the literal, which is a choice to grant privilege to the signifier over the signified.[7] The metaphor that comes to life and the proverbial saying taken literally belong to this family. As Bergson says: "'A comic effect is obtained whenever we pretend to take literally an expression which was used figuratively"; or, "Once our attention is fixed on the material aspect of a metaphor, the idea expressed becomes comic.'"[8] In Aristophanes' *Wasps*, for example, Philocleon pretends to be some smoke in order to escape from the house in which he is being constrained to stop him sitting on a jury. The comic theorist Olson's analysis of such situations relates the phenomenon to a sense of superiority (which is a regular of comic theory). Olson says that Philocleon's ploy is funny because it is so stupid to think that 'a patent impossibility would deceive anyone' and that we are laughing at Philocleon as a fool.[9] I suggest, by contrast, that the scene and many others in Aristophanes are, rather, literalist to the point of being anti-realist. For a split second, Philocleon *is* some talking smoke.[10]

5 Although at a formal level Plautus maintains a veneer of new comic realism which excludes such flights of fancy, his language allows things to come to life in a manner which is not dissimilar. One nice little example occurs in the opening scene of *Curculio*, where the young man with his offering *becomes* the offering, when the slave deliberately misinterprets the referent of the accusatives in his master's perfectly ordinary accusative and infinitive construction. In a scene which is thick with images of eating, drinking, and sex, the joke is not purely grammatical.

> Ph. nunc ara Veneris haec est ante horunc fores;
> me inferre Veneri uoui iaientaculum.
> Pa. quid? te antepones Veneri ianientaculo? *Cur*. 71-3

Ph. Now this is an altar of Venus here in front of these doors. I have vowed to bring Venus breakfast.
Pa. What? You've vowed to put yourself in front of Venus as breakfast?

6 Phaedromus attempts to hit back by putting Palinurus on the plate too, along with *hosce omnis*, which in performance could be made to refer not only to a train of non-speaking slaves[11] but more importantly to the audience (who are of course "not really there"). But Palinurus caps it again by driving the point to its logical conclusion: *tum tu Venerem uomere uis* ("then you want to make Venus sick", 74).

7 This opening scene is a showpiece of theatrical physicality and sensuality.[12] Sight, smell, hearing and touch are all active, as are bodily functions such as eating, drinking, sex and evacuation. The play begins towards the end of the night, when a young man enters carrying a lighted taper and followed by his slave. The opening tableau is well discussed by Ketterer, who shows how the candle not only creates the theatrical night-time by its primary semiotic function, but also works with other props to "help define characters by the ways in which the characters handle and react to them".[13] Phaedromus is a lovesick young fool who is a metaphorical slave; Palinurus is a controlling slave who is powerful within the world of the play.[14] The primary narrative purpose of the scene is to open the door in order to bring forth Phaedromus' beloved and the action of the play. I will examine the physicality of the scene through the interlocking symbols of the door and liquids.

8 It is a paradigmatic convention in new comedy that the stage door creaks when a new character is about to appear.[15] A new entrance is heralded when a character says something like 'listen, I heard the door creak at your house. Someone's coming out.' Cue arrival. As readers, we may paradoxically be in a better position than audiences to notice the multilayered semiotic functioning of this convention, since we are obliged to experience the "noise" only through imagination. In performance, an audience might hear a stylised theatrical creaking-sound elicited by a member of the crew (although probably not by an actual door creaking, which would not create the right semiotic effect), or they might hear nothing at all at a physiological level, but only the sound of a character informing them that the door is creaking. The astute reader (in theatre or library) ought in addition to hear the signification of the theatrical device. The "creaking door" routine, then, signifies, first, a noise to be imagined; second, the approach of a new character into the scene; and, third, the play of a device of theatricality. In the opening scene of *Curculio*, Plautus goes one better: he has the young man sing praises to the lovely door of the brothel which holds his beloved – lovely, because it *doesn't* creak. She can come out to him in secret, without anyone hearing.

9 All stage doors, all creaking doors, are active theatrical signifiers. This cleverly quiet door, however, is remarkable for its liveliness even in such company. Whatever physical shape it may take in performance, the door is effectively anthropomorphised in language and comes to life, with eyes, nose, and mouth, and a distinct liking for food and drink. Dwelling on each of these briefly may help us to delineate its details.

10 It is the door's eyes, those most anthropomorphising of signs, where the tenor of the metaphor is furthest from the vehicle. The door 'has eyes' simply because Phaedromus speaks to it like a lover. Phaedromus describes the door thus: *huic proxumum illud ostiumst oculissumum* ('Next to it is the dearest little door', 15), just before directly greeting it *salue, ualuistin?* ('hello, how are you?'). The superlative pseudo-adjective which he chooses – *oculissumum*/ 'most eye-y' – is certainly recognizable as a term of endearment, but is

sufficiently uncommon to alert the astute reader both to the anthropomorphising effect here and to the significance of eyes elsewhere in this play. The more conventional *oculus* as a term of endearment can be found for example at *Cist.* 53, *Cur.* 203, *Mil.* 1329, and *Ps.* 179,[16] but the only other example of the superlative comes around a hundred lines later in this play, when the old woman Leaena greets Phaedromus in terms highly reminiscent of his greeting to the door: *salue, oculissume homo* (120a), a greeting which will gain extra resonance once we meet the ocularly-challenged Curculio. More immediately, however, the dear little eyes of the door provide Palinurus with an opportunity to pun on its literal physical state (closed) and to draw it further features.

PAL.ostium occlusissumum,
caruitne febris te heri uel nudiustertius
et heri cenauistine? *Cur.* 16-18
PAL. Shuttest little door, were you free of fever yesterday and the day before and did you eat well yesterday?

11 So Palinurus pretends that the door might have been ill (a cold in the nose, perhaps), and would enjoy eating (the door as maw, but this time with good table manners). Its mouth is not only for the ingestion of dinner, however, but also for speaking. Its (non-)fulfilment of its proper theatrical role, that is to creak when someone comes out, is celebrated in markedly linguistic style.

PH. bellissumum hercle uidi et taciturnissumum,
numquam ullum uerbum muttit: quom aperitur tacet,
quam illa noctu clanculum ad me exit, tacet *Cur.* 20-22
Ph. By Hercules I've seen it to be most beautiful and most silent, never a word does it mutter. When it opens it's quiet; when she comes out secretly to see me it's quiet.

12 The door is *seen* to be most beautiful (physical characteristics) because most silent (with three consecutive lines ending in a word for silence), and the noises which it does not make are explicitly words. Finally, this mouth will be available for the third standard function of that orifice, to kiss. after 60 lines of entertaining exposition, Phaedromus turns attention back to the door and offers it a ritual drink (snide comments from Palinurus) in order to produce the old woman who is the gatekeeper of the girl, which it does with reverse-semiotic silence. Palinurus suggests giving it a kiss.

Ph. agite bibite, festiuae fores;
potate, fite mihi uolentes propitiae.
Pa. uoltisne oliuas, [aut] pulpamentum, [aut] capparim?
Ph. exsuscitate uostram huc custodem mihi.
Pa. profundis uinum: quae te res agitant? Ph. sine.
uiden ut aperiuntur aedes festiuissumae?
num muttit cardo? est lepidus. Pa. quin das sauium? *Cur.* 94
Ph. Come on, drink, holiday doors; drain the cup and graciously be propitious to me. Pa. Would you like some olives, an hors d'oeuvre, the odd caper, perhaps? Ph. Rouse up your gatekeeper and send her here for me. Pa. you're wasting wine: what's making you do that? Ph. Hush. Don't you see how this most festal house is opening up? Did the hinge say a word? It's charming. Pa. Why don't you give it a kiss?

13 The door is a symbol of desire. The crucial issue is how to get it open to get at the girl. Even once the old woman has come out (we will consider this further below), the lover still has to invoke Roman door magic and perform the earliest extant Roman paraclausithyron (147-54) in order to gain access to the beloved.[17] The process is a bit like cracking a nut, perhaps, as Palinurus rather indelicately suggests at 55-6 when he uses this language to describe kissing as a preliminary to sex.

14 The door's response to Phaedromus' song is to open a second time, this time producing the girl herself. This time it *does* make a noise (*sentio sonitum,/ tandem edepol mihi morigeri pessuli fiunt*, 'I hear a noise: at last those bolts are doing what I want', 156-7), in amusing contradiction of the praise heaped on it for helpful silence, but also in determined performance of its proper theatrical role. The comment of Phaedromus thus draws attention not only to the opening of the door but also to the conventionality of the sound involved in opening a door, and to his own subordination to the rules of theatre. The door is doing what he wants in opening, but it is determined to point out that doors in comedy make a noise. Sound therefore is signifier of door opening, and second-order signifier of the significatory role of noisy doors in the arrival of characters on stage, and a third-order signifier of the character of this particular door.

15 Whereas hearing is the primary sense involved in the action of the door, it is the sense of smell which drives the stage business of the inset scene with the old woman who guards the entrance. When Phaedromus propitiates the door with wine, he also lays a trail for the *anus*, to make her smell the drink, follow her nose, and open the door. Leaena, the embodiment of that ancient calumny of old women as *multibiba*, sniffs her way across the stage, following the scent of the wine, to which she sings a song of desire in which perverse eroticism is scarcely veiled. The scene is ripe with the fragrance of the wine, and a hint of sexual suggestiveness about the old woman's desire for it. (Palinurus would like a drink too, but his desire is by contrast rational and masculine.) Although on the surface the object of Leana's desire is the wine, the separate identities of people and things in this play are hard to distinguish, such that her desire for the fine old wine is also for the young man (by implication both Liber and Phaedromus) who brings it to her and pours his/its liquid into her.

> Le. Flos ueteris uini meis naribus obiectust,
> eiius amor cupidam me huc prolicit per tenebras.
> ubi ubi est, prope me est. euax, habeo!
> salue, anime mi, Liberi lepos.
> ut ueteri' uetu' tui cupida sum!
> ....
> sed quom adhuc naso odos opsecutust meo,
> da uicissim meo gutturi gaudium.
> nil ago tecum: ubi est ipsus? ipsum expeto
> tangere, inuergere in me liquores tuos,
> sine, ductim. *Cur*. 96-98a, 105-9
>
> *The bouquet of old wine has reached my nostrils, and love for it has drawn me desirous out here through the darkness. Wherever it is, it is near me. Hurray, I have it! Hello, my darling, delight of Bacchus. We are both old and I desire you!* [Celebration of the scent of the wine] *But up to now the scent has reached only my nose. Grant me also joy to my throat. Not you! Where is he himself? I desire to touch him; let me pour your liquid into me in draughts.*

16 The Loeb translator takes the referent of *ipsus* to be the bowl in which most of the wine is still sitting, and *tecum* to refer to the droplets of wine on the door. It would indeed be possible to interpret the scene like this, but given the anthropomorphising of things and the literalisation of metaphors in the play it would be possible also to envisage *nil ago tecum* as reflecting an attempt by Palinurus to intervene.[18] The scent of the wine "has gone off in this direction" (109) which the old woman follows and which brings her to Phaedromus.

17 Wine, however, is not the only liquid prop active in this scene: there is water also, both the water which Leaena pours onto the door when it determinedly creaks to announce

the entrance of the girl, and the rain which Palinurus predicts will fall as a result of the old woman's metaphorical rainbow. When the old woman finally achieves the consummation of her desire, Palinurus comments ironically:

> Pa. ecce autem bibit arcus, pluet credo hercle hodie. *Cur.* 131a
> *But look how the bow is drinking; I think it will rain today for sure.*

18 The old woman has become a living simile, not bent forward in the act which signifies old age, but bent backwards as she indulges her desires. The rainbow is a signifier of rain, hence Palinurus' weather forecast, but it must also connote a crude joke in which the predicted rain is incontinence in response to excessive drinking.[19] A second opportunity for evacuatory humour occurs when Leaena greets door and girl with injunctions to silence and pours a little water on the door to keep it quiet.[20] Whether it is ordinary water or something cruder, Palinurus adds an extra layer to the personification by turning the act of watering into a medicinal action, and returning the metaphor to the insult *merobiba* (77).

> uiden ut anus tremula medicinam facit?
> eapse merum condidicit bibere, foribus dat aquam quam bibant. *Cur.* 160-1
> *Do you see how the shaky old woman gives it the treatment? She herself has learned to drink the wine, while she gives the door the water to drink.*

19 These opening scenes stress the life of things in Plautus' world and particularly this play, but this is only an intense manifestation of a general phenomenon in drama of the Plautine type, which is a form of interest in the signifier over the signified. Theatrical signifiers signify 'thing', not thing: a travelling cloak and hat are not primarily for keeping a person warm and dry (or indeed shaded from the sun) but are a sign of his role as someone coming from outside the stage world to destabilise it (or leaving it likewise). A theatrical ring not the ordinary ring such as audience members wear (although even ordinary rings nearly always have extra connotative work to do), but the theatrical signifier of plot device. So strong is its signifying power, that even a mention of a ring is inclined to make us expect from it a significant role in the plot, most commonly either in the trick or as a token in a recognition scene.[21] The remainder of this paper will be concerned mainly with the stories of two particularly powerful Things in the play, the ring and the letter, followed by various body parts which feature highly.

20 The ring in *Curculio* plays out both of the roles which are typical of rings, and will find a partner. Its story, which we can piece together with hindsight at the end of the play, begins with the father of Planesium and Therapontigonus, Periplanes, whose signet ring it was, a gift from their mother (603). The old man bequeathed it, as is proper, to his son on his deathbed (*Cur.* 636-9) as a sign of inheritance and of the passing on of social rights and duties. It continued its role as authoriser of official and financial business for the son, Therapontigonus, featuring in the soldier's account (or, at least, in Curculio's account) of his past and proposed business transaction with the *leno* Cappadox and the banker Lyco. Whoever gives the banker a letter sealed with this ring will have Therapontigonus' authority to make the banker give the money to the pimp and the girl to the bearer of the sealed letter (*Cur.* 345-8). Soon after its starring role in Curculio's account of the spectacular stupidity of Therapontigonus in telling him all this, the ring acts as financial pledge in a game of dice, where it appears to have a symbolic, almost magical, effect alongside the ritual invocation of the name, Planesium, by which Curculio realises that the soldier is the lover of his own young patron's beloved (356). Next, the ring becomes a victim of theft (360) while its drunken master sleeps.[22] Curculio slips out, pretending to be going to the toilet, then legs it back to Epidaurus to present the ring as a symbol of his

genius to Phaedromus. Once there, it gains the limelight again during the trick of Lyco which will free the girl. Curculio enters the scene in disguise, presenting himself as the freedman of the soldier, designated only by the rude nickname Summanus.[23] By contrast, the ring itself is a true and authoritative indicator of identity, acknowledged as such by Lyco's description of it as unmistakable (422-3). The ring is conspicuous by its absence when the soldier appears on stage at 533 and begins the unravelling of Curculio's trick and the plot. Lyco assures him that he dealt, like any decent businessman, with the bearer of the sealed letter (550), while Cappadox draws on all the resources of the *leno*'s trade (577-8) to insist that he owes the soldier nothing. The description of his 'one-eyed freedman Summanus' (543-4) and his 'freedman Summanus' (582) from both his business partners leads Therapontigonus to the inevitable conclusion. Who is a one-eyed person in possession of the ring? It was Curculio: *is mihi anulum surrupuit* (584).

21 No sooner does this moment of truth push the play into its next stage than Curculio himself appears again, complaining about Planesium, now united with her lover, who will not leave him alone but keeps badgering him about the ring. Now that it has completed its role in the intrigue, the ring has a second part to play in the recognition. Planesium hurries on stage, closely followed by her lover, demanding to see the ring, whose early history she can recount. Curculio invents a fake alternative history: first that it was a present from his – er – aunt (602) and then, closer to his original story, that he won it from a soldier in a game of dice (609). Cue entry of the soldier and resulting chaos which is only resolved when Planesium forces Therapontigonus to tell the ring's true story, a story in which she can fill in the details of the names of the principals, their common mother and nurse (643). As if by magic, the ring has a double: Planesium has always kept with her a ring that she had on her when she was lost and which Therapontigonus recognizes as a present that he gave her on her birthday (656).

22 It is a different prop, however, which acts as the ring's first partner in driving the plot: a letter. Letters, purloined or otherwise, are among the most obvious yet still also most powerful of programmatic signifiers in other media. What is perhaps surprising is the extent of their role in plays, where the written medium is more distant from the act of communication than in novels or various other media, such as forms of didactic, which take a more or less epistolary form.[24] Writing, an important but by no means universal skill in Plautus' Rome, acts as a powerful signifier of plotting in several Plautine plays. It is the perfect programmatic image, because it epitomises the art, the artificiality, and the deceitfulness of plot and play, despite the fact (as Rosenmeyer points out[25]) that communication between play and audience is actually hindered by the presence of a letter until a character makes a conscious effort to mediate. Plautine letters, moreover, are among the props which the genre shares with tragedy.[26] Chrysalus (*Bacch.* 810) makes it clear that the letter he uses to trick the old man is the direct descendant of the one that caused trouble with Bellerophon, who brought a letter which brought about his own death, while the letter scene which opens *Pseudolus* may perhaps contain a less specific echo of such scenes as the letter writing opening to Eurip. *IA*.[27] There are letters which set things in motion before the play opens, such as in *Epid*., *Bacch*., and *Mil*.. Then there are the higher-profile letters which feature in the plays themselves, to the extent that they almost seem to acquire an iconic or emblematic status, as in *As*., *Bacch*., *Mil*., and *Trin*.. Good evidence for the programmatic value of letters comes from the fragments of Caecilius. Not only does he have one *fabula palliata* called *Epistula* (and there is an Alexis

play called *Epistole*), but also in another, *Synephebi*, a fragment contains what looks like a comic manifesto, including deception through letters.[28]

23 The story of the letter in *Curculio* is briefly told, for it is subordinate to that of the ring for which it is primarily vehicle. It remains hypothetical until Curculio leads young master and slave inside so that Phaedromus can write and seal the letter, under the parasite's instruction, while Curculio eats his just reward (365-70). Everything goes according to plan and Curculio has Lyco eating out of his hand: as the banker reads the letter aloud (429-36), the parasite remarks aside that *meus hic est, hamum uorat* ('he's mine, he's swallowed the hook', 431). Lyco reads not to inform us, for we already knew more or less what the letter must say, but in order to actualise the deception. Letter and ring together work like magic.

24 This particular ring, however, is more than just a signifier of the latest episode in a long history of interventions in plots. It tells its own story, which may relate to the over-determined Romanness of this *fabula palliata* which is pretending to bring Greece to Rome. The Roman context in which this remarkable ring is set is intensified by perhaps the most discussed scene in this play, the moment at 462 when the choragus brings the performative role the 'backstage crew' (as we might anachronistically call them) onto centre stage.[29] Curculio has just left, with a programmatic injunction to all concerned not to cause any delay in the onward movement of the plot and play. He is ironically 'answered' by the appearance of the property manager, who comes out and worries about the actors (especially Curculio) messing up his equipment, and then starts pointing to landmarks of the Roman forum, which the audience can in fact see around them, but which within the illusion of the play they ought to be pretending that they cannot. Moreover, the choragus uses the topography of the 'real life' city to poke fun at the various vices of contemporary Rome. The signifiers and the signifying process are so intensely highlighted here that the act of signification almost breaks down (we are no longer looking at representational signs but 'real things'), but paradoxically the theatrical spell is enhanced by the semiotization of the very building blocks of theatre. Although the scene is undoubtedly an outrageous cause of delay to the forward movement of the plot, at the same time it bears the burden of intensified theatricality and comic signification. It is in the essence of comedy to be irrelevant.

25 To return to the ring: it carries a seal depicting a man with a shield chopping up an elephant. *Milites gloriosi* are inclined towards pachydermic destruction both in comedy and in real life. Many scholars have read the seal as a topical reference, within the hypothetical 'Greek original', to the exploits of Alexander and other warlords.[30] Scullard, however, suggests that for Plautus and his audience the allusion may be not (only) to Alexander, Antiochus I, Antigonus, or Demetrius Poliorcetes, but may constitute a hint at Scipio Africanus, who also fought elephants (and, in keeping with so many Roman generals, contains a hint of Alexander in his representation).[31] This seems plausible. It is not necessary to follow Scullard, however, in his assumption that the tone is insulting, and that therefore Plautus must have become unfriendly to Scipio towards the end of his life. Comedy is known for its bantering tone, after all, and its capacity to praise through insult. Within the comic ways of doing things, the tone of this offhand, apparently gratuitously irrelevant, pseudo-conspiratorial allusion could be just the right comic way to celebrate a hero. If the audience sees the great Africanus reflected in the surface of this tiny but powerful seal ring, and reads through it to a reflection of Alexander, both references extraneous to the immediate purpose of the play, the effect might be to

confound Greek and Roman politics, culture, and theatre, in such a way as not only to create incidental humour but also to bring opposing worlds into congruence.[32]

26 The ring and its seal are reflected also in another bizarre talisman of this play: Curculio's single eye and its absent partner. Wiles believes that the reference is not to a missing eye at all, but to the parasite's gaping mouth which epitomises his greedy character.[33] When the banker greets Curculio as 'unocule', mockingly, Curculio retorts that he had lost his eye fighting for his country. This could involve a joke on the parasite's prodigious eating – eating as heroic, epic dinners.[34] A double-meaning joke here would indeed be likely, but the intensity of references to eyes in the play, the interest in body parts, and the activity of imagery from Hellenistic and Roman warlords together point also to a 'real' missing eye, an absent presence which epitomises the physicality of the play. The audience sees, and the reader constructs him/herself as seeing, a significatory eye patch and a single eye which indicates the absence of the other and raises the bearer to both monstrous and divine status.[35] The likely connotations of the picture on the seal, moreover, turn Curculio's missing eye into a reference to another heroic, or at least aspirant, general such as the successor of Alexander, Antigonus Monophthalmos.[36] The comic soldier Therapontigonus, then, is a kind of amalgam of Scipio and Alexander, while the parasite is a comic version of Alexander's successor. Perhaps he might also encompass a hint at Hannibal, who in 217 lost an eye from illness, when crossing places flooded by the Arno (Livy 22.2.10), or at Philip II, or even better a glance at Horatius Cocles (cf. *coclites*), of the bridge fame, who lost an eye in battle.[37] Whatever the potential Hellenistic topical references in this play (or its strong Greek intertext), within Plautus' play, outrageously staging its clash of geography and of cultures, the hints become things with a momentary life of their own. Comedy is not in the business of neat, straightforward, allegorical sense in references of this nature, but in bringing to life objects which function as signifiers in and out of the theatrical and historical worlds. There is no realistic need for Curculio to disguise himself with an eye patch, but there is huge comic value in the stress on things, and the interaction between real and fantastic things, thereby created.

27 Curculio's eye is not the only potential missing body part in this play. In the opening routine between young master and slave, when Palinurus hears that Phaedromus is involved in an affair, he worries that it might be with a *pudica* or at least *quam pudicam oportet esse* ('one who ought to be modest', 24-5). When Phaedromus denies any such thing, Palinurus says that it is fine for him to love anyone suitable, as long as he is careful to ensure the appropriateness of "witnesses".

> [Pa.] semper curato ne sis intestabilis.
> Ph. quid istuc est uerbi? Pa. caute ut incedas uia:
> quod amas amato testibus praesentibus. *Cur*. 30-2
> *[Pa.] Make sure you are not dewitnessed. Ph. What sort of a word is that? Ph. Take care to stick to the open road: love what you love with your testes present.*

28 The joke, which is untranslatable in English, depends on the meaning of *testes* as (legal) witnesses and a reference to castration as a punishment for adultery.[38] It works three ways: Phaedromus must make sure that he would not be uncomfortable if his love would be witnessed, and that he should not lose his capacity to act as a witness (because of *infamia*), and that he should not lose his capacity to act as a lover.[39] More important, however, is this early hint that the integrity of body parts will be vulnerable in this play.[40]

29 A final dysfunctional body part is the pimp's gut. Why is Cappadox ill? It is said to be convenient for the plot that he should be kept out of the way undergoing his incubation

in the temple so that the young lovers can meet, but most plays manage to get the blocking character more effectively out of the way by other, less colourful, means. It has also been suggested that his illness accounts for the continued virginity of Planesium, but again other plays manage this convention for the anonymous citizen girl quite easily in other ways. Part of the explanation is probably simply cruel humour in the face of suffering and disability, especially since problems in the abdomen and the digestive system offer many opportunities for hamming up the character's reaction to the symptoms, not to mention a wildly inappropriate pregnancy image (*Cur.* 221).[41] But the processes of theatrical semiotics drive us to ask for more. Elam discusses a scene in a Marx Brothers film, where there is audience expectation that scratches will be significant in the plot.[42] Scratches, the audience feels, cannot just be inert abrasions to the skin but must *mean something*. In fact, they do not. The refusal to *mean* in a semiotically credible way is, according to Elam, an aspect and indication of the farcical nature of Marx brothers' humour. So too with *Curculio*: it may be that, despite the play's temptation to us to be semioticians, the primary point of Cappadox's rotten gut is the intensity of physicality, with the building blocks of the play being their own absolute point. A bad gut in any old play cries out for interpretation, but a bad gut in a play which contains also a missing eye, a candle, two rings, a letter, water and wine, not to mention a close shave with amputated genitals, might in fact be its own farcical point -- to be farce. Griffith offers an extensive survey of body parts in Greek drama, with occasional Roman forays, which shows the massive potential for a powerful semiotics of the body on the ancient stage, although his conclusion is that the dramatic baring of the breast by Clytemnestra at Aesch. *Cho.* 896-7is a moment of semiotic intensity rarely if ever paralleled in Greek drama.[43] The things in Plautine comedies may not have the dramatic and symbolic pretensions of Clytemnestra's breast, but they do have an extraordinary life of their own.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ambrose, Z.P. (1980). "The etymology and genealogy of Palinurus." *The American Journal of Philology* 101, 449-57.

Arnott, W. G. (1995). "The opening of Plautus' *Curculio*: comic business and mime." *Plautus und die Tradition des Stegreifspiels: Festgabe für Eckard Lefèvre zum 60. Geburtstag*. Ed. L. Benz, Stärk, E., Vogt-Spira, G. ScriptOralia (Tübingen), 185-92.

Barsby, J. A., ed. (1999). *Terence: Eunuchus*. (Cambridge).

Bergson, H. L. (1911). *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic (authorised translation, by C. Brereton and F. Rothwell)*. Trans. C. C. Brereton, F. Rothwell, F. (New York).

Coleman, K.M. (1990). "Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological enactments." *Journal of Roman Studies* 80, 44-73.

Duckworth, G. E. (1994). *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment, 2nd edn with a forward and bibliographical appendix by Richard Hunter (1st edn 1952 Princeton)*. (Norman, OK).

Elam, E. (2002). *The Semiotics of Theatre*. (Oxford).

Elderkin, G. W. (1934). "The *Curculio* of Plautus." *American Journal of Archaeology* 38, 29-36.

Fantham, E. (1965). "The *Curculio* of Plautus: an illustration of Plautine methods in adaptation." *Classical Quarterly* 15 84-100.

Fraenkel, Eduard. (2006). *Plautine elements in Plautus (tr. Frances Muecke and Tomas Drevikovsky , orig. 1922/1960)*. (Oxford).

Goldberg, S. M. (1995). "Improvisation, plot and Plautus' *Curculio*." *Plautus und die Tradition des Stegreifspiels: Festgabe für Eckard Lefèvre zum 60. Geburtstag*. Ed. L. Benz, Stärk, E., Vogt-Spira, G. ScriptOralia (Tübingen), 33-41.

Gowers, E. (1993). *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature*. (Oxford).

Griffith, R. D. (1998). "Corporality in the ancient Greek theatre." *Phoenix* 52, 230-56.

Grimal, Pierre. (1966). "Échos plautiens d'histoire hellénistique." *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire offerts à André Pignaniol*. Ed. Raymond Chevallier. Vol. 3. (Paris), 1731-41.

Hardie, P. R. (2002). *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion*. (Cambridge).

Jenkins, T. E. (2005). "At play with writing: letters and readers in Plautus." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 135, 359-92.

Ketterer, R. C. (1986). "Stage properties in Plautine comedy I." *Semiotica* 58, 193-216.

Lefèvre, E. (1991). "*Curculio* oder der Triumph der Edazität." *Plautus barbarus: Sechs Kapitel zur Originalität des Plautus*. Ed. E. Lefèvre, Stärk, E., Vogt-Spira, G. ScriptOralia. (Tübingen), 71-105

Marshall, C. W. (2006). *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy*. (Cambridge).

Milnor, K. (2002). "Playing house: stage, space and domesticity in Plautus' *Mostellaria*." *Helios* 29, 3-25.

Moore, T. J. (1991). "*Palliata Togata*: Plautus' *Curculio* 462-86." *American Journal of Philology* 112, 343-62.

---. (2005). ""*Pessuli, heus pessuli*": la porta nel *Curculio*." *Lecturae Plautinae Sarsinates VIII: Curculio*. Ed. R. Raffaelli, Tontini, A. (Urbino), 11-36.

---. (1998). *The Theatre of Plautus: Playing to the Audience*. (Austin).

Murray, Gilbert. (1943). "Ritual elements in the New Comedy." *Classical Quarterly* 37, 46-54.

Olson, E. (1968). *The Theory of Comedy*. (Bloomington).

Parker, H. N. (1989). "Crucially funny or Tranio on the couch: the *servus callidus* and jokes about torture." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 119, 233-46.

Petersmann, H. (1971). "Philologische Untersuchungen zur antiken Bühnentür." *Wiener Studien* 5, 91-109.

Prescott, H. W. (1942). "Exit monologues in Roman comedy " *Classical Philology* 37, 1-21.

---. (1939). "Link monologues in Roman comedy " *Classical Philology* 34, 1-23.

Riggs, L.W. (1992). "Another purloined letter: text, transparency, and transcendence in Le Misanthrope." *The French Review* 66, 26-37.

Rosenmeyer, P.A. (2001). *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature*. (Cambridge).

Scullard, H. H. (1974). *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World*. (London).

Slater, N. W. (2000). *Plautus in Performance: The Theatre of the Mind, 2nd edn (1st edn 1985 Princeton)*. (Amsterdam).

Sofer, Andrew. (2003). *The Stage Life of Props*. (Ann Arbor).

Spencer, D. (2002). *Roman Alexander: Reading a Cultural Myth*. (Exeter): Exeter University Press.

Tarrant, R. J. (1978). "Senecan drama and its antecedents." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 82, 213-63.

Watson, P.A. (1982). "Martial's fascination with *lusci*." *Greece and Rome* n.s. 29, 71-6.

Whitehorne, J. E. G. (1975). "Golden statues in Greek and Latin literature." *Greece and Rome* 22, 109-19.

Wiles, D. (1991). *The Masks of Menander: Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance*. (Cambridge).

Wilner, O. L. (1931). "The character treatment of inorganic roles in Roman comedy." *Classical Philology* 26, 264-83.

NOTES

1. Reading a text, however, is what most of us do most of the time and indeed is a significant element in the reception history of much dramatic literature, Roman comedy included. For further discussion of this matter, see my forthcoming book, *Reading Roman Comedy: the Playful Poetics of Plautus and Terence*.

2. See Elam (2002) 6: 'It was above all the folklorist Petr Bogatyrev, formerly a member of the Russian formalist circle, who undertook to chart the elementary principles of theatrical semiosis. In his very influential essay on folk theatre (1938b), he advances the thesis that the stage radically transforms all objects and bodies defined within it, bestowing upon them an overriding signifying power which they lack — or which at least is less evident — in their normal social function: 'on the stage things that play the part of theatrical signs... acquire special features, qualities and attributes that they do not have in real life' (pp. 35–6). This was to become virtually a manifesto for the Prague circle; the necessary primacy of the signifying function of all performance elements is affirmed repeatedly, most succinctly by Jiři Veltruský: 'All that is on the stage is a sign' (1940, p. 84).'

3. Ketterer (1986) is one of the few critical works to concentrate on the semiotic power of physical items in Roman comedy. Sofer (2003), although not concerned with anything earlier than mediaeval drama, offers valuable insights into the life of things on stage. He distinguishes between different categories of things, according to which objects such as part of the scenery are «just there» until an actor brings them to life, such that the distinction between props and scenery is primarily movement. Marshall (2006) 66-7 divides the things of the stage into three categories, costume, set, and property, all of which can blend into each other. See also 70-72 for the symbolic value of stage properties.

4. Marshall (2006) 49-50, 52: the set contains three doors, but in many plays only two are active and the third is simply ignored.

5. The symbolic importance of houses within the play makes them signifiers which also look to the physicality of the performance itself. Philolaches (young man) has a soliloquy (beginning at line 84) about how a man is like a house: this is both parodic *sententia* and programmatic metaphor pointing towards the form of the play, which we realise only with hindsight. See Milnor (2002) on domestic space in this play.

6. For a traditional reading of the play as an indicator of the relationship between Roman and Greek comedy, see Fantham (1965); for a satirical and topical reading of the play, see Moore (1998) ch. 7, Moore (1991), and (especially on the door scene) Moore (2005), together with other papers in that volume; on the pose of improvisation, see Goldberg (1995) and Arnott in the same volume.

7. On the related subject of the personification of inanimate objects, Fraenkel (2006) ch. 4.

8. Bergson (1911), section 9.

9. Olson (1968) 54.

10. Aristophanic humour is much inclined towards this kind of physicalisation of metaphors, such as the girl-pigs in *Ach.* 719ff., the wine-peace which is the controlling image of the same play (see especially 193ff.), or the baby-wineskin at *Thesm.* 689ff..

11. Since Phaedromus addresses someone other than Palinurus at 75, to ask for the wine bowl, we must assume that there is a procession of slaves following the principals. The fact that they would be carrying other bits of equipment shows up the insincerity of Phaedromus' pose of slavery in carrying the candle.

12. See especially Arnott (1995).

13. See Ketterer (1986) 196-7.

14. In fact, Palinurus will not turn out to be one of the great slave-*architecti* like Chrysalus or Pseudolus, in part because he shares his role with the parasite Curculio, but at this stage in the play he is certainly performing the controlling role and directing the gaze of the audience.

15. On the convention of the creaking door, see Prescott (1939), 5, Prescott (1942), 17; Tarrant (1978) 246-7, who indicates that the convention belongs to the more self-conscious parts of ancient theatre, occurring only three times in fifth-century tragedy, in late plays of Euripides, twice in Aristophanes, and thereafter in post-classical drama both comic and tragic, as well as in other literature which affects a theatrical pose; Petersmann (1971), where the noise contributes to discussion of whether the stage door opens inwards or outwards (most likely the latter). Duckworth (1994) 116 chides Norwood for the latter's mocking objection to the creaking door and its role as "a leading Plautine character", but although Duckworth is right to complain that Plautus is being blamed for a convention that is widespread in ancient drama, Norwood's lively personification of the door is perfect for my reading of it. The Journal's anonymous reader suggests that the noise might be a trace of ritual, such as Murray (1943) argues to be operative in Menander and (unconsciously, according to Murray) his Roman followers. The noise which heralds the arrival of the god is certainly hymnic.

16. It occurs nine times in this sense in Plautus (*TLL* IX.2.451.37-41) but not in other authors. The diminutive *ocellus* is also used by Plautus as a term of endearment (for example at *As.* 664, *Most.* 167, *Trin.* 245, *Truc.* 579) and is regularly used in tender and erotic contexts by the elegists, although not specifically as a term of endearment.

17. This anthropomorphic door who receives drink offerings and propitiatory hymns is the direct ancestor of the door in Ovid's most famous paraclausithyron, *Am.* 1.6, where again there is slippage of identity between door and doorman. In Propertius' most explicit manifestation of the topos, 1.16, the song is delivered through the mouth of a speaking door. The door as living being is clearly crucial to the workings of the paraclausithyron. See especially Moore (2005) on this scene, and on the personification of the door in Ovid's version, see Hardie (2002) 141.

18. While it is true that there is nothing in the text to indicate that Leaena notices the presence of Palinurus before 111, since her behaviour here is clearly artificial, mad, or surreal, (or all three), it would be entirely possible for her to react to something unconsciously before she begins to wake up from her wine-induced trance.

19. See Ambrose (1980) 451.

20. Straight reading: Wilner (1931) 269 'and shrewdly she waters the hinges to prevent creaking'. The obligingly quiet door has a history in the comedy of adultery, for example in the outrageous

invented story told by the old relative in Arist. *Thesm*., in the role of a young wife slipping out of bed to meet her lover and pouring water on the hinges of the door to ensure its quiet compliance. Given the scatological humour of this scene (the false young wife/old relative had claimed a stomach upset as the reason for leaving her husband), one might wonder again about the nature of the water.

21. Elam (2002) 18: 'This is, in effect, a refinement on the semiotization law: phenomena assume a signifying function on stage to the extent that their relation to what they signify is perceived as being deliberately intended.' My point here is that the function of a Word in pointing to a Thing can be taken up by drama (including, in some cases, that which takes place in real life) by a Thing which points to further meanings. I am therefore stretching the range of the terms «signifier» and «signified» beyond their basic linguistic usage, in order to express the point about different levels of denoting which a word or thing may do.

22. Such, at any rate, is Curculio's story (*ego ei subduco anulum*), although he had claimed only a few lines earlier that the soldier had lost the ring to him, having pledged it in the game and lost. No doubt he aims to make his account more heroic -- in the manner of the comic trickster, that is, rather than the upright citizen. At 584, Therapontigonus describes his action as *is mihi anulum surrupuit*.

23. *Cur*. 413-18: Curculio claims to have his false nickname (as Summanus) from his habit, when drunk, of "spilling over" in his sleep. The name is also that of a Roman lightning god, associated with Jupiter: see Ambrose (1980) 451 for the interplays of evacuatory humour of weather in the play.

24. The letter in Moliere's *Le Misanthrope* is interestingly read by Riggs (1992) as reflecting in its protagonist a "modern" preference for the written over the spoken word and for a sense of written evidence as more reliable and straightforward, a transparency which is called into question by the social roles of the play. By contrast, ancient letters almost always have the potential to deceive, however hard their authors work to attempt to control their reception.

25. Rosenmeyer (2001) 66.

26. On letters in Plautus, see Jenkins (2005).

27. Rosenmeyer (2001) ch.4 examines in detail the role of letters on the Euripidean stage.

28. *In amore suaue est summo summaque inopia /Parentem habere auarum inlepidum, in liberos / Difficilem, qui te nec amet nec studeat tui. /Aut tu illum furto fallas aut per litteras /Auertas aliquod nomen aut per seruolum /Percutias pauidum, postremo a parco patre /Quod sumas quanto dissipes libentius!* We owe the fragment to Cic. *ND* 3.29.72.

29. See particularly Moore (1991) and Lefèvre (1991).

30. Elderkin (1934) reads the play (or rather, its hypothetical Greek original) as thinly disguised ridicule of Demetrius Poliorcetes and various of his relatives and mistresses. For Elderkin (29), 'clearly, Therapontigonus is a second Alexander', while also alluding to Demetrius Poliorcetes, the faithful companion (therapōn) of Antigonus (he notes the suitability of this character in a play also featuring a Leaena, the name of Demetrius' mistress). Whitehorne (1975) 112-14: Plautus maintains topical references from the Greek play, which make multiple allusions to Alexander and other Hellenistic generals. Grimal (1966), disagreeing with Elderkin in detail but conscious of the potential for satire, gives an extensive account of the possible topical references, which he reads as Hellenistic and attributes to the «original», suggesting, rightly in my opinion, that the poet 'se soit contenté d'accumuler les traits satiriques empruntés à l'actualité, sans se soucier de les composer en un ensemble cohérent.' See his discussion of the seal and its potential connection with coinage, p.1738.

31. See Scullard (1974) 267 on the identification; Spencer (2002) on the role of Alexander in Roman literature.

32. Scullard (1974) 175 has another interesting little elephant reference for readers of Plautus. When Pseudolus adopts the guise of the imaginary slave Syrus, he might be referring to

Hannibal's favourite elephant of that name. The description at 1218ff., beginning *rufus quidem*, might plausibly describe an elephant, although for many people this will be one elephant too many.

33. Wiles (1991).

34. See Gowers (1993).

35. Most readers (e.g. Watson (1982), Slater (2000) 177) assume that Curculio's eye patch is «false», i.e. a disguise, like that donned by the young man Pleusicles in *Miles Gloriosus*, when he is dressed up as a pirate in order to escape with his beloved from under the nose of the eponymous soldier. For the role of eyes and seeing in that play, see my forthcoming book, chapter 3. A false eye patch here would add an interesting dimension to the process of theatrical mimesis, especially when we remember the mask which stands between the eye patch and the actor's face, but the disguise is sufficiently well integrated into the play to encourage the idea that in some sense Curculio might "really" have missing eye. From a realist point of view, if this were a new acquisition one might expect Phaedromus to refer to it.

36. A suggestion made already by Elderkin (1934) 32. The potential associations of one-eyed soldiers are legion: Grimal (1966) 1734-5 puts stress particularly on Pyrrhus and on the potential for antiroyalist satire in the presentation of Curculio/Summanus as one of any number of Hellenistic kings.

37. See Elderkin (1934). For more on the history of identifications see also Slater (2000) 177 and note 12.

38. Cf. the punishment threatened towards the (falsely accused) adulterous soldier in Plaut. *Mil.* 1420, and (appropriately) in Ter. *Eun.* 957, where, as Barsby states, the reference is probably to castration although other traditional and humiliating punishments are also possible. See Barsby (1999), 262.

39. See Treggiari (1991) 271 on the conventional punishment of adulterers, legal or otherwise. Cf. also an echo of the joke near the end of the play, at *Cur.* 695, while the astute reader might even groan at the mention of *testis* (565) in the scene where the soldier finds out that his sexual position has been usurped, and at the jokes about witnesses when it looks as though the problems of the play will be resolved in court (621-3). I discuss the humour of repetition in my forthcoming book, chapter 4. The threat of castration against an adulterer is the subject of humour also in Plaut. *Mil.* 1417-20 and Ter. *Eun.* 943ff..

40. Normal theatricality depends on the convention that pain is not «real», that no one is really injured or ill or killed in a play, not even (especially not) the slaves who joke about the sufferings and for whom suffering would be such a major part of real life. See Parker (1989) on torture humour. What makes the torture-performances of Imperial Rome so particularly shocking is the breakdown of theatricality in the acting out of violence in reality, on which see Coleman (1990).

41. Marshall (2006) 142 suggests that there could be a reference to *Amphitruo* here, "with line 221 referring metaltheatrically but indirectly to the portly actor's previous role as the pregnant Alcumena".

42. See Elam (2002) 8.

43. Griffith (1998).

ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the semiotics of props and other physical items in Plautus' *Curculio*. The play is over-determined with props: a candle, a door, fragrant wine, water, a ring, which comes in twice (and has a twin), a letter to go with it, a seal with represented elephant-slaying sword, a missing eye, a bad gut, animal names, like the wolfy banker Lyco, and the weevil-parasite Curculio, and a property manager who comes out for a little chat with the audience about the real-life Rome they can see around them. I am particularly concerned with the most powerfully metatheatrical and metapoetic elements, including the preternaturally quiet door, and the ring which has a life of its own weaving through the play and indeed through the comic tradition.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Plautus, Curculio, comedy, props, semiotics, stage conventions

AUTHOR

ALISON SHARROCK

alison.sharrock@manchester.ac.uk